

earliest Islamic cities outside the Arabian peninsula, was founded not only through nomadic expansion but also because it was a port which served both the desert grazing grounds and the rich canal-irrigated lands of Mesopotamia.

Arab control of the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the eastern Mediterranean placed at the disposal of the caliphate the nautical skills of the seafaring people of Bahrain, Oman, and the Coptic shipbuilders of Egypt. A Muslim fleet soon emerged in the Mediterranean which could challenge the formidable sea power of Byzantium. By 674 the sea walls of Constantinople itself were under Arab siege, though the city successfully resisted all Muslim attacks until 1453. When Damascus became the capital of the newly founded Arab Empire in about 660, there was a distinct economic shift that operated in favour of Iraq and Syria, benefiting Basra and other towns in Iraq. When Baghdad was founded in 762 by the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur, trade in the Persian Gulf received an even greater impetus. By this time, the caliphate included the maritime province of Sind in India, most of Iran and Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and north Africa as far as the Atlantic coast of Morocco. The conquest of Andalusia and large parts of Iberia brought the Muslims into proximity with a Christian and Frankish Europe that was to produce a lasting influence on both social perceptions and the exchange of technology.

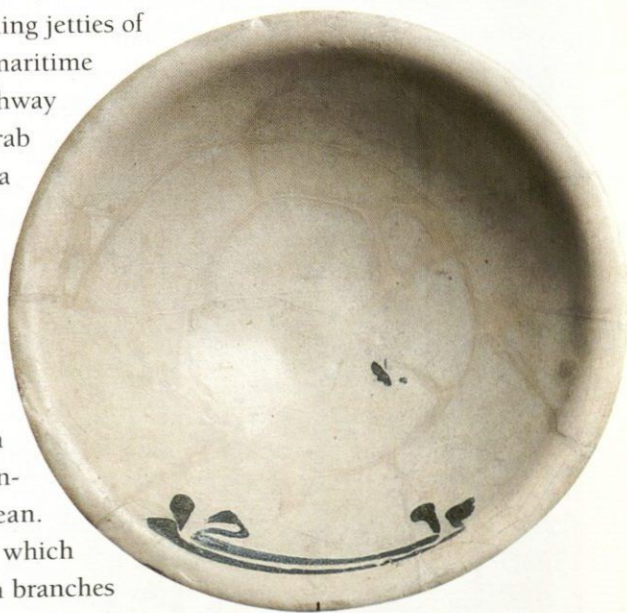
During the Umayyad caliphate, the immediate problem for the rulers of the newly conquered provinces was to establish a uniform system of land taxes,



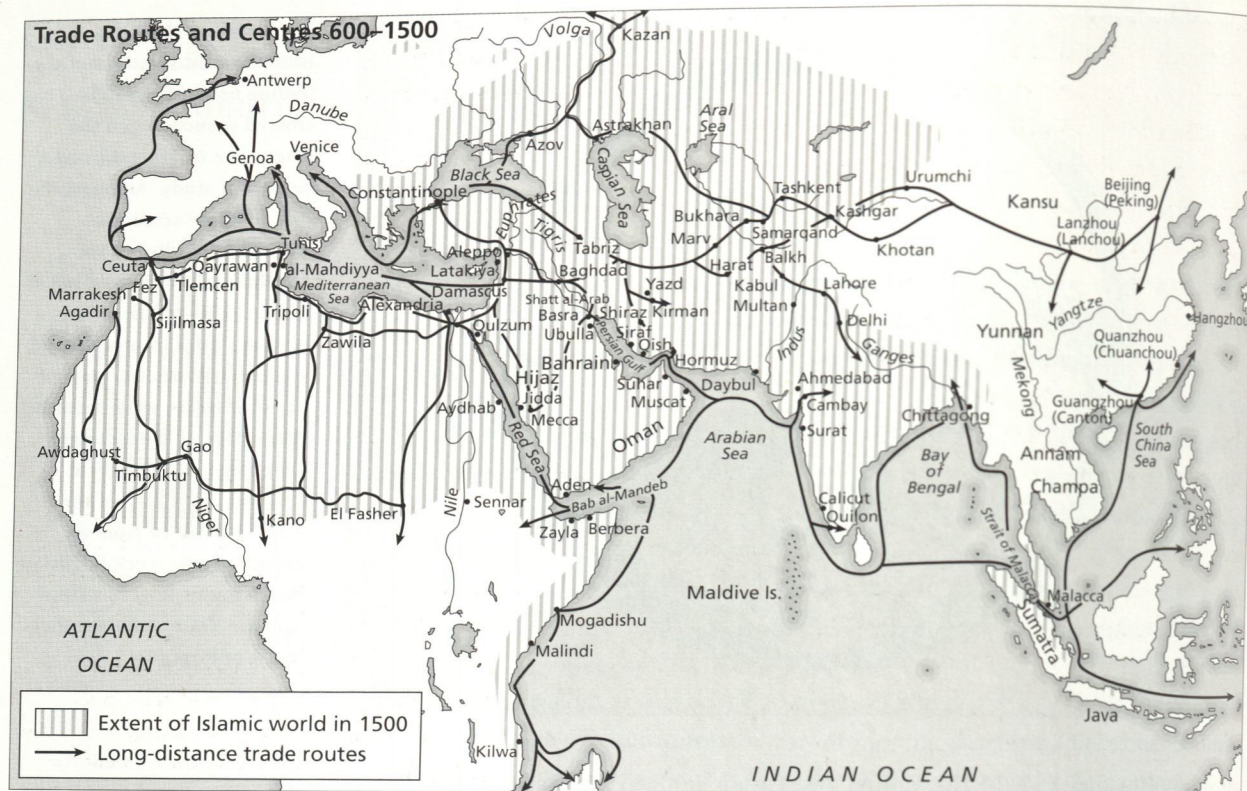
followed by reform of the chaotic currency and monetary systems. As the fourteenth century Moroccan historian Ibn Khaldun reminds us, the early Arab rulers never forgot the celebrated dictum ascribed to the Iranian model king Anushirwan (Khusraw I, 531-79): that royal authority rested on the army, the army on money, money through taxes, taxes through cultivation, cultivation through justice, officials, and the quality of political advice. The growth of economic production and consumption in the enlarged market of the Muslim world was made possible by three parallel developments. First, the Islamization of the conquered people created a partially homogenous religion, moral, and juridical system. Secondly, the Arabization of the army and the administration helped to break down ethnic and national barriers by recruiting local entrants or by the incorporation of the warlike steppe people. Finally, the Semitization process was completed through the adoption of Arabic as the universal language of communication, education, literary expression, and government. The linguistic mastery over the subject people, even in the case of the Iranians, who had by far the strongest cultural identity in the caliphate, was a remarkable triumph for the Muslim conquerors.

The geographical and commercial significance of Muslim unification was not lost on contemporary writers. Al-Muqaddasi, perhaps the most perceptive and thoughtful Arab geographer with extensive first-hand knowledge of the world of Islam, observed c.980 that the sun set on the extreme side of the territory into the Atlantic, the all-encircling ocean. In the east, the Arabian peninsula was surrounded by the Sea of China, as Arab geographers described the Indian Ocean. The Mediterranean they called the Sea of Rome. And it was China rather than India or the islands of Java and Sumatra which identified the great eastern sea in Arab minds, because Muslim shipbuilders, sailors, navigators, merchants, and geographers knew that the same sea which touched the landing jetties of Suez and Basra also stretched as far as China, providing a maritime highway to the Pacific, just as the Mediterranean was a highway to the Atlantic. Indeed, by the time Baghdad was founded, Arab merchants and sailors had already accumulated nearly half a century's experience of sailing to China and India. A sizeable colony of Arab and Iranian merchants traded with and lived in the imperial port city of Canton. Each year not only Arab merchants but also those from Frankish Europe sailed east towards India from Suez, Jidda, and Basra. This transoceanic and transcontinental trade, originating in China and terminating in western Europe, had begun in ancient times. In the fourth century BC the Greeks of Alexandria already knew the sailing route across the Indian Ocean. Muslim sailors were aware that the Red Sea carried dangers which could be fatal to ships. Long, uninterrupted coral reefs with branches extending far into the open sea obstructed the coastlines. To find a safe pas-

Items were traded across vast distances. One of the notable goods traded over a long period was Chinese porcelain. Muslim potters responded to the techniques and styles of the Chinese. This ninth-century bowl from Iraq belongs to a group which displays Chinese influence in their low feet, flowing sides, and everted rims. It is decorated in blue kufic with the single Arabic word 'blessing'.







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